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CHENNAI • MADURAI • VAYANADA • BENGALURU • KOCHI • HYDERABAD • VISAKHAPATNAM • COIMBATORE • KOLKATA • THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • DELHI • BHUBANESHWAR • SHIMLA • MANGALURU • TIRUPATI • TIRUCHI • TRIVENDRAM • SANGLI • HUBLI • DHANU • KOTTAYAM • KANNUR • VILLUPURAM • KOLLAM • TADIPALLI • NAGAPATTINAM • THIRUVARUR • KALABURGI

ON WOMEN'S DAY, GAS PRICES CUT, SUDHA MURTY NOMINATED TO RS



Modi wooed women voters by announcing ₹100 per cylinder price cut, nominated noted philanthropist Sudha Murty to the Rajya Sabha | P4

SECOND DROP IN PRICES IN 6 MONTHS

This is the second reduction in LPG prices in six months. Rates were slashed by ₹200 in August. Non-subsidised cooking gas price will be cut to ₹803 per cylinder in the national capital with effect from midnight of Friday/Saturday

PRICE CUT TO EASE FINANCIAL BURDEN

PM Narendra Modi said the reduction in LPG cylinder prices to mark Women's Day will ease the financial burden on millions of households. On Sudha, he said her presence in the Upper House is a powerful testament to Nari Shakti, exemplifying the strength and potential of women in shaping the nation's destiny



Modi Sarkar Guarantee

India to become world's third largest economy

India improves from 11th to 5th place in 10 years

Hamara Sankalp Viksit Bharat

No surprises as Rahul in first list from Wayanad, Tharoor T'puram



Congress leaders K C Venugopal (centre), Ajay Maken (right) and Pawan Khara address a press conference at the AICC headquarters in New Delhi on Friday | M

PREETHA NAIR @ New Delhi

MUCH along expected lines, the Congress on Friday unveiled the first list of candidates for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections with former party president Rahul Gandhi seeking a mandate from Kerala's Wayanad for the second term. The other prominent names include former Chhattisgarh chief minister Bhupesh Baghel from Rajnandgaon, Shashi Tharoor from Thiruvananthapuram and Congress general secretary K C Venugopal from Alappuzha.

Announcing the names at a press conference in the capital, Venugopal said the party's utmost priority is to dislodge the BJP government in the 2024 elections and win maximum Lok Sabha seats. Out of the 60 seats discussed by the Central Election Committee (CEC) on Thursday, 39 names were cleared for eight states.

Of the 39 candidates, 15 belong to the general category and 24 from the SC, ST, OBC, and minority communities. Besides, 12 of them are under the age of 50, he said.

While in Kerala the party has retained most of its sitting MPs except one, among the most watched contests would be in

Wayanad, where Rahul will take on his INDIA bloc ally CPI's Annie Raja. Rahul, who was previously an MP from Amethi, lost the seat in 2019 but won from Wayanad.

The other top contest will be between Union minister Rajeev Chandrasekhar and Shashi Tharoor, who is seeking a fourth term from Thiruvananthapuram. Kerala will see three of Congress' high-profile leaders Rahul, Venugopal and Tharoor in the fray. Sources said the decision to field Venugopal was to reclaim Alappuzha, the only seat it lost to the CPI (M) in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls.

As a sitting Rajya Sabha MP, Venugopal has two more years to complete his term. His decision to enter the Lok Sabha fray comes at a time when the BJP needs only a few more seats for getting majority in the RS.

In Karnataka, the Congress retained Deputy CM D K Shivakumar's brother D K Suresh in Bangalore Rural. No names have been announced for the Kalburgi seat amid speculation that Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge will contest from there. Four candidates from Telangana including former Union minister Balram Naik (Mahabubabad) also figured in the first list.

DK Suresh, Geetha among 7 from K'taka

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Bengaluru

THE Congress on Friday announced its first list of seven candidates for the Lok Sabha elections in the state.

DCMDK Shivakumar told reporters that the party may release its second list on March 14. "We finalised the candidates based on the opinion of party workers, local leaders and MLAs and on the survey report's recommendations," Shivakumar said. In the first list, the Congress seems to have chosen candidates for the constituencies where it faced no competition in the party.

The list comprises DK Suresh (Bengaluru Rural), Shreyas Patel (Hassan), Geetha Shivakumar (Shivamogga), SP Mudahanume Gowda (Tumakuru), HR Alagura (Vijayapura), Anandaswamy Gaddadevaramath (Haveri) and Venkataramanaswamy alias Star Chandru (Mandya).

Former MP Mudahanume Gowda, who joined the Congress a week ago, has been chosen for Tumakuru as the party could not find other winnable leaders. **CONTINUED ON: P4**

No word on Amethi

Though speculation is rife over Rahul's candidature from Amethi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's from Rae Bareilly, Venugopal declined comment. "The second CEC meeting on March 11 will discuss more seats," he said

Setback for Cong as I-T tribunal refuses to free up funds in banks

Party calls tax department's action politically motivated, to move Delhi High Court for relief

PREETHA NAIR @ New Delhi

IN a setback to the Congress ahead of the Lok Sabha elections, the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal on Friday rejected its plea to lift the restrictions clamped on its bank accounts by the I-T department in connection with a tax dispute.

The I-T tribunal also rejected the request of senior advocate and Congress' Rajya Sabha MP Vivek Tankha to keep the order in abeyance for 10 days so that the party can approach the Delhi High Court for relief.

The Congress has alleged its

main bank accounts were frozen on February 16 following an income tax demand of ₹210 crore (₹135 crore and ₹75 crore in two separate notices) for assessment year 2018-19 and alleged discrepancies and delays in tax returns. It has also accused the taxmen of withdrawing ₹65 crore from its accounts.

Speaking to this newspaper, Vivek Tankha said the party will move the HC soon. "We are disappointed with the order of the tribunal. They have denied us the standard or-

der. We are a national party and we very well argued our case," he said, adding that the freeze on funds has put the party at a disadvantage in the election season.

The tribunal had earlier allowed Congress to operate the accounts till a final decision was reached. However, it also put a lien of ₹115 crore on the accounts, which means that much money is frozen and the party can access only the remaining funds.

Describing the tax department's action as 'politically mo-

tivated', Tankha said: "We've given logical and reasonable points to the tribunal but they did not accept them. They took away our exemption under 29C for a delay of 20 days or something (in filing tax returns). But I'm still an income tax payee. I have an income of ₹199 crore and an expenditure of ₹197 crore. So the total tax component would be only ₹60 lakh. Instead of that they are forcing over ₹135 crore," he said.

He also stressed that now only constitutional courts can rescue elections, democracy and political parties.

CAFE BLAST: NIA DETAINS TWO IN BALLARI, B'LURU COPS QUIZ ONE

KIRAN BALANNANAVAR / PRAVEEN KUMAR @ Ballari/Bengaluru



Screengrab of suspect at Ballari bus stand

THE National Investigation Agency (NIA) probing the Rameshwaram Cafe blast case has taken two persons into custody after they were found talking to the accused who arrived in Ballari from Bengaluru.

It has also taken a terror suspect, who was arrested earlier and was lodged in prison, into custody on a body warrant. Meanwhile, Bengaluru police have picked up a man whom the bomber met after planting the IED in the cafe.

According to sources, the accused landed in Ballari the same day after the blast. The NIA released the footage of the bomber roaming around in Ballari bus stand on the night of March 1. The NIA has been following the accused after his foot-

age was obtained from the cafe in Bengaluru. A team of 10 NIA sleuths arrived in Ballari on Wednesday. The CCTV footage from Ballari bus stand shows that the accused spent at least two hours there. In another footage, he is seen speaking to two persons outside the bus stand.

Meanwhile, a police team launched a search in Ballari on Friday. The team visited some houses, shops and places of worship to gather information, while the NIA sleuths quizzed the two detained persons. Soon after the NIA team landed in Ballari, the district remained on

high alert. The accused might be travelling without using his mobile phone. The police suspect that someone in Ballari could be helping the accused.

In one of the clippings, the accused is seen running behind a bus, but not getting into it.

Meanwhile, the NIA sleuths obtained a body warrant from the NIA Special Court and took into custody Minaj alias Mohammed Sulaiman, 26, a cloth vendor from Ballari and a prime suspect in the ISIS-inspired Ballari module case. The investigators suspect links between Minaj and the cafe bomber.

The Bengaluru police are questioning the person whom the cafe bomber is said to have met on the day of the blast. It is still not known if the person is an associate of the bomber or if it was a ploy by the bomber to mislead the investigation.

EXPRESS READ

Electoral bonds: SC to hear SBI plea on March 11

New Delhi: The Supreme Court would hear on March 11 the plea filed by the SBI seeking extension of time till June 30 to give details of all electoral bonds encashed from April 2019 onwards. The apex court would also hear the contempt plea filed by ADR (Association of Democratic Reforms) on the same day against the SBI | P7

Abducted Army JCO rescued in Manipur

Imphal: A serving Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) of the Indian Army, who was abducted from his home in Manipur's Thoubal district on Friday morning, was rescued by security forces in the evening. The JCO, identified as Komsam Kheda Singh is currently at Walkhlong police station (near Kakching) in Thoubal district | P8

Seer, aide held for sexually abusing minor

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Tumakuru

IN a late night operation on Thursday, a team led by Superintendent of Police Ashok KV arrested Bala Manjunatha Swamiji, 37, and his associate K Abhilash of Vidhya Chowdeshwari temple near Huliyurdurga for allegedly sexually assaulting a minor girl in a temple at Hanganahalli in Kunigal taluk of Tumakuru district.

They were arrested under the POCSO Act. The accused were produced before a local court, which remanded them in judicial custody on Friday. Abhilash is a trustee of Vidhya Chowdeshwari temple.

In a complaint with CEN crime police filed through Abhilash on February 10, the swamiji alleged that a gang led by HS Abhishek of Hosakere village in Kunigal taluk has been blackmailing him for money. The swamiji alleged that Abhishek has been threatening him that he has a video clip in which he (swamiji) is seen with a woman in a compromising position.

A woman from Bengaluru, Rajesh of Vijaya Kaali temple near Pandavapura, Srinivas and Chetan of Kavanapura village in Ramanagara district, and Nandish of Kunigal are other members of the gang, the swamiji stated in his complaint. **CONTINUED ON: P5**

SI suspended for kicking men for praying on road

UJWAL JALALI @ New Delhi

A Delhi police sub-inspector (SI) on Friday was suspended for kicking and shoving a few persons, who were offering namaz on a road in north Delhi's Inderlok area.

The incident occurred around 2 pm near Inderlok Metro Station. A sizable gathering had assembled at a mosque in the neighbourhood as it was Friday, resulting in some men spilling to the street to offer prayers. An alleged video of the incident went viral on social media triggering outrage among netizens.

The locality remained tense for several hours with the approach road to the mosque blocked by protesters for traffic. The administration de-

ployed paramilitary personnel in conjunction with the police to prevent any breakdown of the law and order situation.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (north) Manoj Kumar Meena said the protesters dispersed after they were shown the suspension order of the SI, Manoj Kumar Tomar. The blocked roads were then reopened.

Necessary disciplinary action is also being taken against the Tomar, Meena added. The news of the officer's suspension was announced through the mosque's mike, he added. Following the incident, strict surveillance was imposed on the northeast district of Delhi, which had experienced communal unrest in 2020.



A Delhi police sub-inspector seen kicking a man offering namaz on a road in Inderlok area in the national capital on Friday | M

₹5K fine for wasting Cauvery water in B'luru

ENS @ Bengaluru

IN view of the drinking water shortage in the city, the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB) issued an order on Thursday announcing that a fine of Rs 5,000 will be imposed on those using Cauvery water for non-drinking purposes.

A repeat violation will attract an additional Rs 500 per day along with Rs 5,000 fine, the order issued by BWSSB chairman V Ram Prasath Manohar stated. Drinking water cannot be used for washing vehicles, gardening, construction of buildings, fountains, roadwork and such other purposes.

The order is in line with the

BWSSB Act 1964, Sections 33 and 34. The fine will be imposed under Clause 109.

The BWSSB has appealed to the people to call 1916 (call centre) if they see anyone violating the order. The city has a population of around 1.4 crore. The order has been issued keeping in mind the need to provide drinking water to all. It

makes it all the more imperative to minimise wastage of drinking water, the order said.

Of the many steps initiated to tackle water shortage in the city, prices of water supplied through tankers have been fixed and it has been made mandatory for tanker owners to register their names with the local civic authority.

TDP-JSP-BJP alliance almost done but seat-sharing not final

P HAREESH @ Vijayawada

THE tripartite alliance between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Telugu Desam Party (TDP), and Jana Sena Party (JSP) that was finalised in principle on Thursday night made no headway on Friday as the leaders of the three parties are yet to come to a consensus on seat sharing.

TDP supremo N Chandrababu Naidu and JSP chief Pawan Kalyan stayed put in New Delhi on Friday, waiting for a call from the BJP leadership to cut ice. They flew to the national capital on Thursday and held talks with BJP national president J P Nadda and Union Home Minister Amit Shah, where the TDP reportedly expressed its readiness to join the National Democratic Alliance. They are likely to hold discussions with the BJP leadership again on Saturday. BJP's Andhra Pradesh chief Daggubati Purandeswari, who was in Delhi, reached Hyderabad on Friday night as she is scheduled to attend a public meeting addressed by former Madhya Pradesh CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan in Nellore on Saturday.

Sources in the state BJP said the party had initially put a proposal for 10 Lok Sabha and



13 Assembly seats. A senior leader told *TNIE*, "We are ready to settle for less Assembly seats, but will insist for at least 6-7 Lok Sabha seats." He pointed out that the saffron party was able to get a good share of MP seats in all other states where it was striking an alliance. "In Odisha, where there are 21 Lok Sabha seats, the BJP is likely to get 15 seats and the ruling BJD six. If this is the case in a state where the alliance partner is in ruling, we can negotiate for more seats in AP too," he said.

In 2014, the BJP in alliance with TDP had contested 12 MLA and four MP seats. JSP was part of the alliance, but did not contest the elections.

Sources said the BJP is keen on contesting the four Lok Sabha seats it had won in the previous elections. These include Tirupati, Rajahmundry, Narasapur and Visakhapatnam. Additionally, the party is also seeking Araku, Vijayawada, Hindupur and Rajampet seats.